

Research Notes

Socratic and Kantian Ideas of Virtue in *Anna Karenina*

Several passages in *Anna Karenina* suggest a reference to a blend of Socratic and Kantian ideas of virtue. Though Plato, our source for Socrates, and Kant are explicitly mentioned in the novel, we start our investigation not from these references, but from an inconspicuous dialogue between Levin and his carpenter.

In this dialogue, the carpenter has misgauged the length of a staircase he is building, and gets in a conversation with Levin regarding whether the current steps can be salvaged or whether he must build a new staircase:

The thing was that the carpenter has spoiled the staircase in the wing that was being built, having constructed it separately and miscalculated the height, so that when it was installed all the steps were aslant. Now he wanted to leave the same stairs in place and add three more steps.

“It will be much better.”

“But where will it come out with these three steps?”

“If you please, sir,” the carpenter said with a scornful smile. “It’ll go just right. I mean it’ll start out below,” he said with a persuasive gesture, “and go up and up and come out just right.”

“But three steps will also add to the length... Where will it end?”

“Like I said, it’ll start below and come out just right,” the carpenter said stubbornly and persuasively.

“It will come out under the ceiling and into the wall.”

“If you please. She’ll start below. She’ll go up and up and come out just right.”

Levin took a ramrod and began drawing a stairway in the dust for him.

“There, you see?”

“As you wish,” said the carpenter, with suddenly bright eyes, obviously understanding the whole thing at last. “Looks like I’ll have to make a new one.” (576)

Why does Tolstoy insert this lengthy, seemingly purposeless dialogue? A key to its interpretation is in how one computes the length of stairs: The only practical way to do that is to apply the Pythagorean Theorem. If you imagine the height of the stairs as the vertical side of a right triangle, and the floor running below the staircase as its horizontal side, then the stairs themselves form the hypotenuse. The Pythagorean Theorem can be used to compute the length of the hypotenuse (stairs) using the lengths of two other sides of the triangle (the floor and the height). Given this perspective, Tolstoy’s passage reads as an echo of a passage in Plato’s *Meno* dialogue, which features Socrates attempting to define virtue.

In the *Meno* dialogue (58), Socrates and Meno discuss the nature of virtue and whether virtue can

be learned. Socrates states that the idea of virtue is always present in the soul and that “learning” about virtue is only a recollection. To prove that such recollection is possible, he calls for a slave and starts to draw geometric figures, giving the slave hints for calculating the length of the hypotenuse of a right triangle, applying the Pythagorean Theorem. The dialogue does not say what Socrates used for drawing, but the dimensions of the figures are given in feet, so it is likely that he used dust they were standing on. Even though Socrates only asks the slave questions and never states the theorem explicitly, the slave suddenly grasps the idea.

At this point Socrates lets the slave go; the philosopher has made his point that the idea of the Pythagorean Theorem had been present in slave’s mind and that Socrates’s questions only helped to formulate it. Virtue, according to Socrates, is similar, being always present in our souls.

Clearly, there are parallels between the *Meno* dialogue and the episode with the stairs in *Anna Karenina*. In both cases, a character talks with a man of lower social and educational standing and makes dust drawings that are related to the Pythagorean Theorem.

Levin’s lesson in the dust fits neatly with his own pursuit of virtue, moral choice, and the meaning of life. Levin’s quest is clearly important to Tolstoy, as after the title character has died and most of the plot drivers ended, the author dedicates the eighth and final section of the novel, in large part, to Levin’s spiritual journey: “[M]oral choice is the lynchpin around which *Anna Karenina* turns” (Orwin 178). Throughout the section, Levin reads books by many philosophers, none of which satisfy him; finally, he speaks with a peasant, and this brief conversation stirs a swarm of thoughts in his head, after which he arrives at the principal ideas that one must “live for God, for the soul” (796), and that “if the good has the cause, it is no longer the good; if it has consequence—a reward—it is also not the good” (795). In other words, Levin, after rejecting

all he has read, discovers for himself that life should be lived in service of the good. Levin’s thoughts might seem like a nod to Immanuel Kant, who wrote “if... morality... and virtue are to exercise any influence at all on our souls... they can do so only so far as they laid to heart in their purity as motives, unmixed with any view to prosperity” (254–255). Both Levin and Kant state that serving the good should be without any pursuit of reward. (By the time of writing *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy probably had yet to read *The Critique of Practical Reason*, though he may have read *The Critique of Pure Reason* in 1869 (Круглов 137). However, according to the novel, Levin had read Kant, so a reference to this philosopher’s teachings can be justified.)

Yet, we can identify a significant difference between Levin’s worldview and Kant’s teachings, which makes Levin in some respects closer to pre-modern philosophers, like Socrates, than to Kant, who believed that the moral law is the result of applying reason and logic: “More refined, though equally false, is the theory of those who suppose a certain special moral sense, which sense and not reason determines the moral law” (128). Levin takes a Socratic route to reaching his conclusion—by looking within himself. He refutes that reason may be the source of his knowledge about virtue:

Was it through reason that I arrived at the necessity of loving my neighbor and not throttling him? I was told it as a child, and I joyfully believed it, because they told me what was in my soul. And who discovered it? Not reason. Reason discovered the struggle for existence and the law which demands that everyone who hinders the satisfaction of my desires should be throttled. That is the conclusion of reason. (797)

We can see that according to Levin, and contrary to Kant, notions of the good and of moral law cannot be derived by reason. Because Levin believes that “the necessity of loving my neighbor [...] was in

my soul,” the reader is brought back to Socrates, who argued in *Meno* that ideas are not explained to us during our lifetime, but are already contained in our immortal souls. This thought by Levin follows a very similar one within the same episode: “I haven’t discovered anything. I’ve only found out what I know” (796).

Approximately at the time of writing *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy came to a differentiation between reason (разум) and understanding (разумение), with the latter being similar to the ancient concept of *logos* (Medzhibovskaya 201–203). One interpretation of reason’s inability to grasp the notion of good is that this notion pertains to understanding, and not reason.

Levin uses himself as a source for truth not just in thought but in action. For example, when Levin encounters moral dilemmas, rather than applying reason and over-analyzing the issue, he relies on his an intrinsic (and not reasoned) knowledge of right from wrong. “[He] firmly knew *what* he had to do, he knew just as well *how* he had to do it all, and which matter was more important than another” (790–791).

Examples of Levin’s moral judgments, which Tolstoy lists later, do not appeal to reason; rather, Levin somehow knows right from wrong in each particular case. As a result, we can gather that while Levin’s *conclusion* regarding virtue is reminiscent of Kant, the method for *discovering* this virtue is more in line with Plato’s *Meno*.

Next, we can see a possible pre-modern twist on Kantian teachings in the episode when Levin looks at the starry sky:

“Don’t I know that the stars don’t move?” he asked himself, looking at a bright planet that has already changed its position over the topmost branch of a birch. “Yet, looking at the movement of the stars, I cannot picture to myself the turning of the earth, and I’m right in saying that the stars move.

“And would the astronomers be able to understand or calculate anything, if they took into account all the various complex movements of the earth? All their astonishing conclusions about the distances, weights, movements and disturbances of the heavenly bodies are based solely on the visible movement of the luminaries about the fixed earth, on that very movement which is now before me, which has been that way for millions of people throughout the ages, and has been and will always be the same and can always be verified. And just as the conclusions of astronomers that were not based on observations of the visible sky in relation to the same meridian and the same horizon would be idle and lame, so my conclusions would be idle and lame if they were not based on that understanding of the good which always has been and will be the same for everyone, and which is revealed to me by Christianity and can always be verified in my soul.” (816)

As Tolstoy was not writing an astronomical treatise, we should interpret this quote in the context of Levin’s soul-searching. Clearly, Levin is consciously valuing his internal knowledge (that the stars move around him) over the conclusion that astronomers calculate (that we are moving with respect to the stars). Levin directly extends this method of discovery beyond astronomy to the understanding of the good. In other words, in this passage, Levin supports the method for finding virtue that Socrates champions in Plato’s *Meno* dialogue—virtue and other knowledge can be found (and verified) from within one’s soul. A different interpretation of this scene, though not contradicting the one above, is presented by Medzhibovskaya: Levin here rejects a traditional — one, for instance, promoted in the Plato’s *Gorgias* dialogue—argument that *logos* reveals itself to people via the motion of celestial bodies (210).

At the same time, Tolstoy's juxtaposition of the starry sky and the good in one sentence reminds us the most-often quoted sentence from Kant: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within" (260).¹ In fact, later Tolstoy would use this quote from Kant as an epigraph to his book *On Life* (PSS 26: 313).

The juxtaposition, however, was made before Kant; it can be traced to antiquity, as Boethius made it in the early sixth century:

Was my garb and mien like this when I explored with thee nature's hid secrets, and thou didst trace for me with thy wand the courses of the stars, moulding the while my character and the whole conduct of my life after the pattern of the celestial order? (17)

Philosophy mirrors the science of the day. Kant lived in the age of a triumph of heliocentric Newtonian physics, which matches his faith in reason and logic as the source of truth; in his monologue, Levin, on the other hand, says that "the stars move," choosing a non-Newtonian worldview, similar to the geocentric one in antiquity. We may as well extend the choice of antiquity-like worldview from the first part of Levin's formula (the sky) to the second one (the idea of the good, for Levin, or the idea of the moral law, for Kant). As a result, yet again, Tolstoy presents the reader with Levin's perspective, which sounds Kantian in conclusions, but is pre-modern in the way in which it rejects logic and embraces using oneself as a source.

From a passage reminiscent of the *Meno* dialogue on the source of virtue, to Levin's own Kantian-sounding, but internally-discovered conclusions, this note makes one key argument: that Levin's *formula* for virtue is Kantian, but that its *origin* is pre-modern. Perhaps, Tolstoy hoped to help his readers to find true virtue as he

understood it: unique, universal, and intuitively possessed by all.

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Notes

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1. Levin's thoughts about starry sky also point to Tolstoy's entry in his notebook on March 12, 1870: "What does it mean when we say that celestial bodies move following ellipses (Kepler's l[aw])? Does it mean that they move this way? This means only that I perceive them in motion, and time, and space, and ellipses are only forms of my mind, my ideas. We thought that the sun moves, then thought that the moon makes circles, now we think that the earth makes circles" (PSS 48: 117). It is quite possible that this notebook entry is an implicit reference to Kant, who writes a lot about space and time as intuitions in "The Critique of Pure Reason" (23–35). Less than a month later, on April 11, Tolstoy makes another entry, where he laments that Kant's teachings are forgotten or not widely known: "We did not know and forgot methods of Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, indep[endent] toilers, terrifying in their isolation and depth" (PSS 48: 126).

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“I am fond of the French and the Swedes...” Swedish visitors to Leo Tolstoy

True to his internationalist outlook, Tolstoy always tried not to show any bias as far as nations and peoples were concerned. Nevertheless, according to his son Lev L'vovich, he is supposed once to have confessed that he was especially fond of the French and the Swedes (Tolstoj 43). Three Swedish names were singled out by the son as having made a strong impression upon his father, “the well-known Swedish writer” Jonas Stadling, “the young journalist” Valdemar Langlet and “the obviously half-mad” Abraham Bonde (35). In all three Tolstoy found features and opinions dear to his heart.

In early 1892, Jonas Stadling (1847–1935), a journalist and a philanthropic Baptist, learned about the great famine in Russia. Encouraged by American charitable institutions, he decided to travel to the affected regions in order to participate in the relief work and give publicity to the catastrophe. As Tolstoy and his family were actively working among the starving peasants, it felt natural to join them in their efforts. In Moscow, Stadling met Tolstoy's wife, who was in charge of the international contacts. Stadling could promise a considerable amount of money, plus twenty wagons of flour (*Minnen* 49). All personal costs

would be covered through articles in the Swedish and American press.¹

Stadling arrived in the small Klekotki railway station, southeast of Tula, on February 25.² The next day he braved a heavy snowstorm, covering the forty kilometres to Tolstoy's headquarters in an open sleigh. In the afternoon, they passed the river Don, and there—on the other side—lay the village of Begichevka. In front of a one-storied mansion the coachman stopped their sleigh. The courtyard was full of peasants, waiting to see Tolstoy. The writer was not in at the moment, and Stadling was shown to his study. Vera Kuzminskaya, Tolstoy's niece-in-law, greeted him welcome in English, and, after her, a thin young woman, dressed like a Russian peasant girl, entered the room. “Countess Tolstaya?,” asked Stadling. “That's what they call me,” answered Maria Tolstaya, Tolstoy's twenty-one year old daughter (Stadling, *Från det hungrande* 33).

A deep voice revealed that Leo Tolstoy himself had arrived. Dressed in a long sheepskin coat, he entered the room, greeted the Swedish traveller with a firm handshake, complimented him for his warm Lappish dress and showed him to the room where he was to stay. When Tolstoy kneeled down to help his guest to pull off his boots, Stadling could not but be amazed: The Count demonstrated in a very concrete way the equality of all men.

After a while, the relief workers—all young and all vegetarians—gathered for dinner. The main topic at the table was the famine. “It is an enormous catastrophe, as you soon will see for yourself,” Tolstoy explained to Stadling. The government had finally granted financial help, and now it was important to see that as little of the money as possible got lost. Later in the afternoon, Tolstoy was receiving people in distress, and in the evening more relief workers arrived with their reports about the situation.

When Stadling woke the next morning, the courtyard was again full of people who had come to seek help. At breakfast it was decided that Stadling